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ABSTRACT

Adolescents struggle to establish their own identities and become independent in making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescent alienation can result from changes in family structure from traditional two-parent families to one-parent families, decreased family stability, increased mobility of society, population increases, dehumanization of the individual, increased adolescent unemployment, and new standards of sexual behavior. Truancy, dropout, pregnancy, and suicide rates have increased for teenagers. This study attempts to develop a valid and reliable instrument to measure three components of alienation: social isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness in young adolescents ages 10-14. After a literature review, examination of existing instruments, input from middle school personnel, and content validity testing, a 30-item instrument was created. Reliability was established in a two-phase study using 477 middle school students in Massachusetts. The instrument included statements such as "My future does not look good" and "When I need help, I can find someone to help me." A measure of alienation could have practical applications to educators, school psychologists, school social workers, administrators, and parents by allowing them to identify socially alienated students and then to help those students. A three-page list of references is included. (ABL)

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ADOLESCENT ALIENATION: ASSESSMENT AND APPLICATION

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Abstract

Recent studies reveal a pattern of increased adolescent maladaptive coping behaviors associated with feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and inability to deal with problems. The purposes of this paper were to summarize procedures in the development of a valid and reliable instrument to measure feelings of alienation in adolescents, ages 10-14, and to discuss practical applications for school and community health educators, parents, and other professionals. The instrument was composed of three subscales: social isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness. Content validity was established by a panel of ten judges and twelve students. A thirty-item questionnaire was developed based on recommendations from panel members. Test-retest reliability (r=0.778) was established in a two phase study using 477 Massachusetts middle school students. Coefficients of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for items within each subscale. Awareness and understanding of feelings of alienation in adolescents could assist school and community personnel in the development of programs and policies which could better meet the social and emotional needs of students and increase networking among professionals and parents.

Adolescence is a time of conflict and crisis, "a period of storm and stress...a state of internal civil war" (Rogers, 1977). Adolescents strive to establish their own identity and become independent, yet want to be accepted by their peers to the extent of becoming totally absorbed by the group's identity. They struggle to become adults with new roles, responsibilities, and relationships, yet reject adult standards and values. They are a study in contrasts. Hoffer (1969) described adolescents as "temporary misfits" ...individuals who have not found their place in life caught between childhood and adulthood in a developmental "no man's land." The period of adolescence involves the refashioning of personal and social identity.

In his book, The Uncommitted, Keniston (1965) stated that the path toward growing up is always a problem. It entails abandonning those special prerogatives, world views, insights, and pleasures culturally defined as childish and substituting for them, the rights, responsibilities, outlooks, and satisfactions that are suitable for the culturally defined adult. Erikson (1963) described this period as one of conflict between identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation. Psychologists agree that feelings of isolation and disconnectedness are probably more intense during youth than in any other period of growth. And with the increasing stresses of today's society, teens are pressured more than ever to "grow up" before their time.

"Adolescent alienation is a teenager's inability to connect meaningfully with other people. At its roots is aloneness, a feeling that no one else is quite like you, and that you are not what other people want you to be" (Mackey & Appleman, 1984). Changes in family structure from traditional two-parent families to one-parent families, decreased family stability, increased mobility of society, population increases, dehumanization of the individual, increased in adolescent unemployment, and new standards of sexual behavior are a few of the social factors which have had a marked effect on adolescent development. Technological advances, such as the computer and home videos, have drawn many young people into a state of isolation.

While struggling to find themselves, adolescents are given the freedom necessary to test a variety of activities and behaviors with expectations of not being permanently committed or harmed by any of these behaviors. Experimentation, a necessary aspect of adolescence, takes time and involves risk. Statistics related to adolescent behavior no longer portray this experimentation to be harmless. The DHHS report on Drugs and American high school students - 1975-1983 (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1984) reported that 96% of all high school seniors have tried alcohol; 41% report regular partying. Close to 20% of all high school seniors are daily users of marijuana. Recent trends have shown drug use spreading to junior high

and grade schools (Farnsworth, 1972; National Institute on Drug Abuse, 1979a, 1979b, 1980). Truancy and dropout rates have shown an increase. Studies have shown an increase in teenage pregnancies (Cohen, 1983) and sexual promiscuity (Juhasz, 1977). The rate of adolescent suicides has tripled in the last thirty years (Klagsburn, 1981; National Center for Health Statistics, 1974, 1978, 1984).

Jessor (1982) and Marwell (1969) agreed that engaging in socially inappropriate and undesirable behaviors is one aspect of developmental transitions of adolescents. However, several studies which have been completed using adolescent populations reveal feelings of alienation associated with problem and deviant behaviors. Feelings of noninvolvement, isolation, separateness, relative lack of social power, and hopelessness have been shown in studies of drug abuse (Blachly, 1972; Svobodny, 1982), teenage pregnancy (Cohen, 1983), eating disorders (Kagan & Squires, 1984), runaways (Benalcazar, 1982), and teenage suicide (Petrie & Chamberlain, 1983). These studies suggest that adolescents are making behavioral choices based on feelings of alienation.

Estrangement, separation, detachment, isolation, noninvolvement are but a few of the words which have been used to describe the distance between man and others. Feelings of alienation are ageless, sexless, and classless (Burrows & Lapides, 1969; Johnson, 1973; Bryce-Laporte & Thomas, 1976). Numerous attempts have been made to define

the concept and understand its implications on society. (Schacht, 1970; Fromm, 1969; Horney, 1937; Laing, 1965; May, 1953; Durkheim, 1951). Recent discussions and studies of alienation revealed references to varied stages, components, or subscales (Dean, 1961; Heussenstamm, 1968; Feuer, 1962; Neal & Rettig, 1967; Nettler, 1957; Seeman, 1959). However, there was an apparent lack of an instrument to measure feelings of alienation in young adolescents, ages 10-14. The purpose of my study was to develop a valid and reliable instrument to measure three social components of alienation: social isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness in young adolescents, ages 10-14.

A sixty-item pool of statements related to three subscales of alienation was derived from a review of the literature on alienation, existing instruments measuring alienation, and input from middle school personnel and students. Content validity was established by a panel of ten judges and twelve students. The final instrument contained 30 items, 10 related to each subscale. Test-retest reliability was established in a two-phase study using 477 middle school students in Massachusetts. The sample was composed of 224 males and 253 females. Ages ranged from 11 to 15. There were 147 sixth graders, 149 seventh graders, and 181 eighth graders. A Pearson product moment correlation coefficient of 0.774 for the test-retest procedure was statistically significant at the .0001 alpha level. Cronbach alpha indices of internal consistency were

0.576 for normlessness, 0.617 for powerlessness, and 0.718 for social isolation.

"Social isolation is a feeling of separation from a group, to be set apart from a group and its activities" (Dean, 1960). Many young people feel alone, even though they are physically a part of a group. They feel lonely and rejected, unable to form secure, supportive relationships. Typical items in the social isolation subscale were: 1) I feel all alone, 2) I would rather be by myself than with others, and 3) When I need help, I can find someone to help me.

"Powerlessness is a feeling of loss of control over one's destiny, a feeling of helplessness or of being used for purposes other than one's own" (Dean, 1960). Many teens feel powerless to control the events in the lives or the outcome of events in their social system. They feel as if they are being used by others and live with the constant threat of having their lives affected by forces over which they have no control. Examples of powerlessness items were: 1) My future does not look good, 2) Rules are set and I don't seem to have much choice, and 3) My ideas are important and respected by others.

"Normlessness is the absence of values which give purpose or directions to life, a feeling of separation from group standards, a feeling of pointlessness where no real goal exists" (Dean, 1960). Normless youth experience a conflict of goals. In many cases, they are uncertain of

what is right or wrong. Normlessness items included: 1) **I'm not sure of the rules I should follow,** 2) **I know what is expected of me in school,** and 3) **Other people my age find it easier to make decisions than I do.**

Is it important to health educators to identify alienated youth? Development of a valid and reliable instrument to measure feelings of alienation in young adolescents was the initial stage of examining alienation and its possible association with adolescent coping behaviors. Many young people are feeling separated, alone, out of control, and unsure of what is right or wrong. A measure of alienation could have many practical applications to educators, school psychologists, school social workers, administrators, and parents. Awareness of these feelings could assist school personnel in the development of programs and policies which could better meet the emotional and social needs of young adolescents as well as increase networking among these professionals and parents.

Can anything be done in the schools to decrease feelings of alienation? I would like to address this question in two parts. First, what can be done in the health education classroom? And second, what can be done in the school by administrators and other professionals?

Health educators play a key role in the schools. Many areas of the existing health curriculum deal with issues related to alienation. Lessons and programs should be planned to help cope with feelings of social isolation.

powerlessness, and normlessness, build self esteem, develop communication skills, deal with peer pressure, and develop decision-making skills related to health behaviors. Knowledge of content areas, such as alcohol and drug abuse, sexuality, and nutrition are relatively useless if these youth do not feel good about themselves, are not able to express how they feel, are unclear about what is expected of them, and are unable to make decisions about present and future issues. They may engage in what we would consider to be unhealthy behaviors while attempting to cope with the increasing stresses and problems of "growing up" in 1985. Because of the nature of health education, students often share problems and concerns with the health educator. In this role, he or she can be the "link" to professional help available to students.

School psychologists and social workers could identify students with high alienation scores and begin working with individuals and groups of students to reduce the risk of potentially harmful behaviors. For example, a list of 49 questionnnaire numbers of students perceived to be socially alienated by the school psychologist and school social worker were given to me. Scores for these students were compared to the sample means. Of the 49 students, 24 were absent from school during one or both administrations of the instrument. Of the 25 remaining students, 24 had alienation scores which were above the sample mean. With early identification, psychologists and social workers could begin

early intervention programs for alcohol and drug abuse or provide individual or group counseling for students with perceived needs. Teachers could be provided with additional information related to students' emotional and social needs.

School administrators and teachers could increase social interaction with classrooms by using teaching methods which encourage student cooperation. Smaller class size would enable teachers to deal with individual needs. Small groups of students could be assigned to faculty advisors. This would decrease the impersonality of large homeroom groupings and could possibly decrease feelings of alienation. Students would be able to identify with at least one adult mentor or advocate when faced with an "insurmountable" problem.

Students, in many cases, feel powerless in the classroom. They are not allowed input in their education. We expect students to behave as adults, yet we allow them little choice over task or constraints in the classroom. Teachers are pressured to cover specific curricula at the expense of meeting the needs of their students. If asked what they teach, many teachers will respond with their subject area. But in truth, we teach children. And in many cases, the needs of the child are being replaced by the needs of the teacher to be accountable.

Within the school structure, many student governments serve no purpose other than to recognize the most popular students in the school. Student councils and student

representatives can be effective if student input is considered in rules, disciplinary action, and student activities. We are oftentimes guilty of setting rules and organizing activities because we think that they are in the students best interest -- without giving them a chance to respond.

Networking between teachers, psychologists, social workers, administrators, and parents is crucial. There is too little communication among professionals in the school. Information about a student's family situation or about problems he or she may be having in school should be shared among professionals so they may become more sensitive to individual needs of students. Parents can be provided with more information related to their adolescents feelings and needs.

Having taught in the public school system for thirteen years, I understand very well the frustrations of the system. In many cases, curriculum takes priority over emotional needs of students. It is difficult to believe that one or two educators can make a difference in what seems to be happening to young adults. We, as educators, are powerless to make major changes in society or in a child's home environment. But if awareness and understanding of feelings of alienation can enable each of us to reach even one student, we will have been successful.

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